

Bentley University Fitness Areas:
A Second Look
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After my first two weeks of visits to Bentley's gym, I started to get an understanding for the layout of the building and for what people did while attending the gym. However, I didn't have a clear understanding about what motivated some people to go to the gym or why some people avoided the experience completely. How can relationships be built at the gym? What habits get instilled among the student body from frequenting Bentley's workout facility? I decided to focus on discussing three areas with observations and interviews: what makes Bentley's gym unique, how does workout behavior change between individuals and group sessions, and what rituals do people perform when they go to the gym.

Interview with a Classmate

It turns out that one of my classmates has used Bentley's gym for a long time, citing that she's been using their gym since she was an undergrad. During the class break one day, we talked about some of the crowds she noticed in the gym. "There are generally people who are in the gym all the time," she stated. "These people are typically from the Frat houses. As an undergrad, we had joked that some scrawny kids join a frat and became ripped by the time they graduated."

The next time we had class, she talked about an event that overwhelmed the regular gym patrons when she was still a freshman. "During freshman year" she recalled, "The football coach was very unpopular among the players, which lead to many of them quitting early in the season. Normally, players have their own workout area for strength training, but once they quit the team, they weren't allowed in. They ended up using the weight room that every other student has access to. I didn't enjoy the atmosphere that they brought with them, so I didn't go as much as I would have liked to."

After class, she agreed to meet with me at Bentley's Gym and talk about her experiences there. Since I was wearing jeans that day, I didn't wear my gym clothes to class, so I went into the bathroom to change rather than the glass room. As I entered the facility, I noticed that the weight room was more crowded than on my previous trips. There were easily 40 people working out in the weight room simultaneously. Most of the equipment was in use, and many groups were taking turns on some workout equipment. Despite the large number of people in this area, I didn't see my classmate downstairs. I put my street clothes and gym bag in the glass room, and then looked upstairs. While there were still many people in the cardio room, half the machines were not in use. My classmate was using the stationary bike near the front with her headphones in, looking at her phone as she pedaled. I propped myself up onto the bike next to her, and exchanged sarcastic pleasantries. "Long time, no see" she casually greeted. "I know" I quipped back. "I got lost through all these people here. It's a lot more crowded than it usually is." "Well, classes for the undergrads are done for the night, and the student dining halls are not serving food anymore. This is generally the most popular time of day to go to the gym."

We continued our conversation, focusing more on her own personal gym experiences both on and off campus. She works out about 5 times a week, going more times or fewer times depending on her schedule for the week. In addition to using Bentley's workout facility, she has another gym that she goes to closer to where she lives. She only uses Bentley's Gym when she has class that day, citing that it's convenience that determines whether or not she uses one gym over another on any given day. If she has class that day, she would consider wearing her workout clothes to class and exercising after class dismisses. By wearing her workout clothes to

class, she spelled out for me, she avoided the need to change in the glass room downstairs after her workout, allowing her to leave without forgetting anything.

I asked her if there was a type of person she found at her gym that doesn't exist in Bentley's Gym. She took a few seconds to think about my question as she pedaled on the bike. "Not really," she finally spoke out, stretching the words in case she remembered something while she was talking. After she finished her initial statement, she found an alternate answer to my question. "Actually," she finally spoke out in an informative tone, "Bentley's Gym has the competitive type of person that my other gym doesn't have. The competitive spirit amongst undergrads is prevalent in the classes, so I guess it carries over to the gym as well."

"Is that spirit any different between men and women?" I asked, looking for feminine insight into the situation.

"Of course," she explained. "The guys are more vocal about their competition. The women are silently competitive."

After a few minutes of chatting, we went downstairs to the weight room to focus on our own routines.

Group Dynamics

One of the major benefits of working out with a friend is that he can assist you so you do not injure yourself. To improve your abilities, whether it's strength or conditioning, pushing the limits of your abilities is considered necessary to reach higher limits as you continuously work out. A second person can help push the limits of his friend through encouragement or through demonstration. There's also the social element that cannot be ignored from working out with friends, although sometimes this is taken too far.

When working out in a pair, there are two types of spotters I observed during my visits to the gym. The first one of these spotters, who I will refer to as a Passive Spotter, casually sits by while his friend is on a piece of equipment. This person generally sits on another machine nearby in a more relaxed position as if sitting on a couch. Little conversation is happening between the spotter and the spotted person, as the person being spotted is focusing on the workout itself.

The other type of spotter is the Active Spotter, who takes an active role in the routine of the spotted person. This person provides some form of guidance which should help his friend improve. For example, one person was acting as a spotter for a patron who was using the bench press while listening to music, bobbing his head to the music. After several reps, the spotted person attempted to re-rack the barbell, only for the spotter to extend his index finger in front of the bench presser's face, indicating that he had one more rep to go before he completed his set. The bench presser paused for a second, lowered and raised the barbell once more, and then the spotter assisted in re-racking the barbell.

In another example of an Active Spotter, one less experienced patron (who I will name Jim) was working out with a person who was more fit (who I will name Paul) doing bicep curls with an EZ curl bar. Before Jim grabbed the bar, Paul demonstrated how to properly perform the curls and to not rely on his back muscles when lifting the bar. As Jim struggled with lifting the bar, making stretched faces of pain and exclaiming "I feel like I'm going to throw up", Paul dutifully stood in front of him to indicate how low to bring the bar down, occasionally giving Jim a finger of assistance to start raising the bar up again as it wobbled in Jim's grip. In contrast, Paul didn't need much assistance when doing his bicep curls, except to stabilize the bar once or

twice. For the most part while Paul was working out, Jim was a Passive Spotter, although Paul didn't seem to mind. Having a friend with him and showing him how to work out seemed to be beneficial to both of the patrons.

In addition to spotting, people have the potential to give emotional support when they work out. One night when I went to the gym, I noticed one patron, who I will name Donny, sitting on one of the machines. He was sitting on the portion of the machine where his back is suppose to be, with his legs hanging off the machine as if he was going to get on, or perhaps get off. He appeared in a daze, completely distracted from his workout routine. A friend of his, who I will call Max, noticed this, and strutted over. Noticing some space on the same machine, Max plopped right next to Donny and leaned onto Donny as they shared the machine. "You there, dude?" Max asked with a mix of concern and chipperness. They whispered for the next minute, talking soft enough for no one else to hear. Whatever Max was saying, it didn't seem to lift Donny's mood, as he still looked out of it when Max continued his routine. "Hope you feel better" Max affirmed to Donny as he was walking away.

A few minutes later, Donny moved to a free weights bench, with heavier dumbbells ready to be lifted. However, he was still in a funk, thinking about something as he sat and sulked on the bench. Another friend, who I will name Mark, walked towards Donny. Like Max, Mark asked Donny if he was feeling alright. It turns out that Donny was caught speeding earlier that day and got a ticket for it, and was feeling bad about it. As Mark stood next to Donny with his arms folded, they chatted about various aspects of the ticket, ranging from where he was caught to how much the ticket would cost to how his parents felt about it. Mark's advice was essentially boiled down to not worrying about the ticket, as there are better things in life to sweat. It was

unclear whether or not this advice genuinely helped Donny, but Donny started to get ready for his next rep with the dumbbells, reaching down and grabbing them. Mark decided to continue his own routine, but yelled out some advice as he was walking away. “Don’t go so fast there anymore” he casually hollered as he was walking away.

Occasionally, some folks are rude when working out, showing the competitive side my classmate mentioned earlier. During another evening at the gym, I noticed a group of undergraduate students working out on the machines together. One person, who was lanky and on the tall side, was struggling with the weight he was lifting on the tricep extension machine. One of his other friends, who was shorter and stockier, took his turn on it, having little trouble with the weight his friend was using.

“This is actually pretty easy” the stockier friend showboated.

The lankier friend sighed when he heard him say that. “Fuck you” he uttered under his breath. He put his headphones on while he was walking away. The stockier friend stopped the exercise to tease him, getting louder as his friend moved farther away.

“Hey, friend. Where you going, friend? Can we work out together, friend? Friend?”

He finally turned to a guy observing behind him on the bicep curl machine. “I don’t think he’s my friend” he sarcastically declared.

The Solo Experience

Even though some patrons decide to work out alone, many of these solo exercisers feel the need to perform exercises that are better performed with someone else spotting. These patrons generally use the machines or the small free weights when working out. While using the free weights, patrons tend to look in the mirror as they’re working out to ensure that they are

performing the task with the proper technique. I wonder if subconsciously, they are looking at themselves to try to notice an improvement to their physique as they train. That question might be asked another day.

Many patrons insist on using the bench press, even if there's no one else watching them. They generally perform a smaller number of reps per set when compared to those who bench press with someone watching. In addition, they tend to get into some sort of trance in between sets, especially when they add more weight to lift than they did in the previous set. They sit at the end of the bench, legs spread apart, their back arching and their elbows resting on their knees as their wrists relax. They sit perfectly still for about a minute, collecting their breath and preparing mentally for the increased weight.

A few times, I offered to spot for the lonely bench pressers while they're doing bench presses. Most of them declined, dismissing the offer with a "Nah, I'm good" or a "No thanks." One of them, however, accepted the offer for me to spot for him. Due to how close the bench presses are, I had to climb over one bench to get in a proper spotting position.

The guy I was spotting for, who I will name Steve, gripped the barbell in a manner I've never seen before. Most people have their hands spread apart across the bar, with the back of their hands facing towards their head. This hand position builds the most muscle for the pectorals in the chest. However, he twisted his hands so that his fingers were pointing towards his head when he gripped the bar. In addition, he kept his hands close together, which is a position better suited for working out the triceps. He did several reps before he strained to ask me to grab the bar and put it back on the rack. Between reps, I decided to talk to him about his workout.

“Thanks for that” Steve said to me as he was standing up, slightly out of breath. “Ever since I injured my arms, I had to hold the bar in that weird way.”

“Well, that answered my first question.” I replied.

We introduced ourselves to each other, shaking our slightly sweaty hands in the process. Steve has not spent a lot of time at Bentley yet, he is only a freshman. As he was adjusting the weight on the barbell, he told me that he works out 6 times a week, and tries to make it to the gym regardless of the weather. That last part is important, as that observation took place during a snowstorm.

“So you must be living nearby.” I hastily concluded.

“Yeah, I’m on the other side of campus, so it takes me between five to ten minutes to get here.”

I admit to staring at him for a second, trying to think of the dedication he’s putting into this. “How long did it take you today?”

He thought about it for a bit, until finally replying “Longer than usual.”

He asked for me to spot him for one more set. He was pushing himself hard for this set, his mouth stretching outwards as he pushed the bar upwards. However, he did about the same amount of reps with the new weight as he did previously. After finishing the last set, he pulled himself into a seated position and told me he was good now. Wanting to continue with his upper body routine while I worked on my back, we thanked each other and parted ways.

The Food at the Dana Center

In addition to going to the gym, I went to visit the two restaurants that are housed inside the Dana Center. Many patrons choose to visit these restaurants after their workout routines to

make sure the body doesn't try to break down the muscles for fuel (Koopman et. al, 2007). From my observations, one out of every five patrons visits one of these restaurants after his workout routines. There are two options available for patrons to grab food.

One is called The Nest, which is a breakfast oriented location that serves breakfast food such as omelets, pancakes, and oatmeal during the day. During sporting events, the place sells sport concessions, selling snacks to sports fans. This restaurant is open from 8:00 am to 7:00 pm on weekdays, and from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm on weekends. It is the only one of the two options that is open in the morning, so early morning exercisers go there if they want an immediate post-workout meal. I was unfortunately unable to locate a nutritional menu for this location, so I could not confirm what items would be best for the gym patrons. Nonetheless, people who used this location generally bought breakfast sandwiches to eat. During one of my morning visits, I ended up trying one of these sandwiches. One thing I didn't realize was how hot the sandwich would be, even through the protective wrapping. I can't confirm at this time whether people generally waited for their sandwiches to cool before eating or if they scarfed the whole thing down before they burned their hands.

The other restaurant in the Dana Center is Currito's, which serves burritos, salads, shakes and smoothies. This restaurant opens up at noon everyday, and is open either until 7:00 pm for Fridays and Saturdays or 11:00 pm for every other day. Of the two choices, students generally preferred the food at Currito's over that of The Nest, with almost every student going to Currito's when both locations are open. I asked a friend who's been at Bentley for a while about the popularity of the place. "It's not surprising" he informed me. "It's probably the best place to eat on campus."

In terms of food options, there is a wide variety of themes for the main dishes, ranging from Thai to Indian to Tex-Mex. Their drink selection came from bottled drinks behind the counter, which included protein shakes and soft drinks, as well as smoothies blended when the order is taken. My friend suggested ordering bowls rather than wraps, as more food is given to you in that way. In addition, it appears that the tortillas contain a ton of unnecessary calories (for nutrition information, I looked at <https://currito.com/nutrition.pdf>) that might offset the calories that were just burnt off. I ended up trying out the Bangkok bowl with grilled chicken and was very satisfied with my selection. In addition, I ended up buying a small Triathlete smoothie to drink.

While there was a wide variety of choices at both restaurants, there are few items that are explicitly showcased as a good post-workout meal; the Triathlete smoothie is the only item on either menu explicitly highlighted as a post-workout snack. While I understand that anyone can visit these restaurants even if he hasn't visited the gym, the fact that these restaurants are literally a part of the athletic center seems like a missed opportunity. Both restaurants could inform patrons what options would be most appropriate after completing a workout. Given the variety of factors that affect how the body reacts to food after working out, would there be a benefit to highlighting food options that are considered great options after a workout is completed?

Closing Thoughts

After visiting, observing and interviewing patrons at Bentley's gym for the past few weeks, I've thought of a few suggestions which may enhance the community at the gym. Signage that encourages assistance on certain pieces of equipment might help those folks who work out alone. They would learn to use the weights safely with their fellow patrons, and

perhaps begin developing new relationships with them. The restaurants outside the gym might benefit from highlighting items that benefit a person who just worked out. By encouraging people to eat in this area, a greater sense of community may be instilled in the patrons. However, there are still many questions that I am unable to answer. What factors discourage students from going to Bentley's gym? Likewise, what factors encourage regulars at the gym to continuously work out there? Are the meals that students have immediate access to appropriate for post-workout consumption? I look forward to clarifying these questions as my study progresses.

Sources

Koopman, R., Saris, W. H., Wagenmakers, A. J., & van Loon, L. J. (2007). Nutritional interventions to promote post-exercise muscle protein synthesis. *Sports Medicine*, 37(10), 895-906.